

THE MOTORCYCLE RIDERS FOUNDATION

The best-kept secret in motorcycling

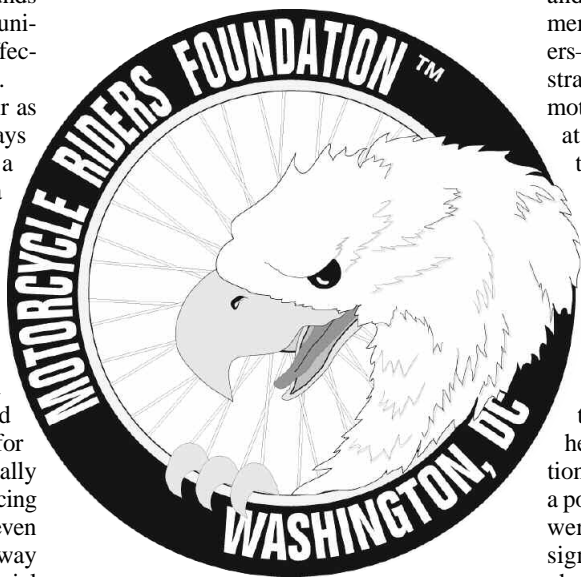
by Fred Rau

ON MAY 11TH of this year, an event took place in the US Senate that was of monumental importance to American motorcyclists, and yet it seems that fewer than one rider in 100 in our country is even aware that anything happened. It all started two days earlier, on May 9th, when Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) proposed an amendment to the national highway bill, to reinstate what had been known as the “federal blackmail law” that motorcyclists had worked so hard to repeal nearly 15 years ago. In case you don’t remember, that law allowed the federal government to withhold federal highway funds from any state that refused to enact a universal helmet law for motorcyclists, effectively creating a “national” helmet law.

Now, before you discount this affair as unimportant to you, because you always wear a helmet and have no objection to a law mandating such usage, take a minute to consider the far-reaching consequences of such a law. There are already under consideration in this country, new laws that would establish universal guidelines for what kind of clothing motorcyclists are required to wear, including specially-armored jackets, pants, boots and gloves, and other laws that would make it illegal for you to “customize” your bike in virtually any fashion whatsoever, including replacing the stock exhaust, carbs, handlebars, or even the seat. There is also a big push underway to require all motorcyclists to carry special “catastrophic health insurance,” so we won’t be an “economic burden to society,” and yet another that would effectively put all the custom bike builders and shops out of business, permanently. What these proposed regulations have in common with the Lautenberg Amendment is that if the US Congress were to be granted the power to blackmail the states into passing a universal helmet law, then the door is opened to use that same procedure to enact all the other anti-motorcycling legislation, without ever having to go to the voters for approval. In other words, a blank check to legislate against motorcyclists at the federal level, and mandating compliance at the state level. And there wouldn’t be a darned thing we could do about it.

The Lautenberg Amendment was essen-

tially snuck onto the Senate agenda at the last minute, only 48 hours before a vote was to be taken on the highway bill. The reasoning was obvious: Proponents of the bill didn’t want to give its opponents time to mobilize an effort to stop it—particularly, the motorcycle rights activists. But they underestimated us, or more correctly, they underestimated the Motorcycle Riders Foundation. Within less than 24 hours of the announcement, the MRF had a lobbyist, in person, inside every single one of the 100 senatorial offices, demanding to be heard. In addition, the Foundation issued an immediate “Call to Action” to its mem-



bers, mobilizing phone trees and e-mail lists that resulted in thousands and thousands of phone calls, faxes and e-mails pouring into the congressional offices, opposing the amendment. Less than 36 hours from initiating the call, the MRF office was receiving dozens of calls from senatorial aides and secretaries, pleading with them to, “Please call off the dogs, we get the message already!” When the vote came on the next day, May 11th, the Lautenberg Amendment went down in flames, by a count of 68 to 29. Washington insiders called it one of the most incredible examples of grassroots political mobilization in history. Several days later, the prestigious “Congressional Quarterly” newsletter carried the headline, “Bikers A Surprising Force in Grass-Roots Lobbying.”

Who Are These People?

Back in the “old days” of the Sixties and Seventies, a group of motorcycling rights groups formed under the blanket name of ABATE. There are a lot of stories about what that acronym supposedly once stood for, but these days it is commonly agreed to mean “American Brotherhood Aimed Toward Education.” ABATE Chapters were, and still are, only loosely tied to each other. There is no national or regional organization, and in some cases, not even a state ABATE office. Individual chapters operated pretty much autonomously, and for the most part were concerned with one issue and one issue only—helmet laws. The membership was 90% or better Harley riders—the black leather, beanie-helmet and straight-pipe crowd. Most of mainstream motorcycling either ignored them, laughed at them, or was completely unaware of their existence. Not that ABATE cared.

But as the years rolled by, a strange transformation began to take place. Maybe the ABATE folks didn’t look much different from the outside, but they were slowly and surely learning to work within the system. Political Action Committees (PACs) were formed. Funds were raised and given to politicians who supported them, or helped defeat anti-motorcycling legislation. Even more importantly, though, from a political influence standpoint, volunteers were mobilized to help candidates post signs, canvass neighborhoods, man the phones, put on fund raisers, etc., etc. Politicians tend to remember who their friends are—who helped get them into office, or to keep their office. One hand washes the other, and the ABATE groups were doing a lot of handwashing. Their number of friends in office, and consequently their political clout, began to grow.

By 1985, the SMROs (State Motorcyclist Rights Organizations), which were mostly ABATE organizations, but also made up of dozens of other activist groups, began to realize that they needed some kind of national cohesiveness to move to the next level. *Easyrider*s Magazine offered their support of the concept, and in 1985 in St. Louis, Missouri, the first-ever “Meeting of the Minds” was held, bringing all these groups to the table together for the first time. Out of that meeting, the Motorcycle Riders